

**TRANSITIONS IN THE LIFE  
COURSE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
MALES:  
ISSUES IN SCHOOLING, ADULTHOOD,  
FATHERHOOD, AND FAMILIES**

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Edited by

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**National Center on  
Fathers and Families**

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National Center on Fathers and Families

*The National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) is a policy research center that is practice-focused and practice-derived. Based at the University of Pennsylvania, NCOFF's mission is to improve the life chances of children and the efficacy of families by facilitating the effective involvement of fathers in caring for, supporting, and advocating on behalf of their children. Efforts are organized around three interdependent approaches: program development, a policy research and policymakers engagement component, and dissemination activities. NCOFF's research plan is developed around seven "Core Learnings," distilled from the experiences of programs and agencies serving fathers, mothers, and children around the country.*

*Core funding for NCOFF is provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.*

The opinions expressed in this monograph are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of their respective institutions.

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# PREFACE

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Not since the 1960s and 1970s—when research in the field was at a peak—have family issues captured as much attention or sparked as much wide-scale debate as they have in recent years. Casting its net to address a variety of problems that fall outside the typical domains of psychology and sociology (where much of the early work was located), research on families is part of a growing interdisciplinary focus which is no longer simply implicated in questions about family development. Rather, the present interdisciplinary focus of the field attempts to respond to massive changes in the needs, structures, poverty levels, and formation patterns of families and the policies that are designed to remedy the increasingly complex problems they face.

A significant and compelling part of research on families over the past 20 years explores the impact of father involvement and father absence on children's development and complements much of the existing research on issues in other areas—e.g., female-headed households, poverty, social welfare, and public policy. In particular, the potential impact of family support legislation, national welfare reform agendas, and persistent systemic problems at local and state levels lend a sense of urgency to the research discussion about father participation in families. What is noticeably lacking in these discussions, however, is a focus on programs that serve fathers and families and the voices of practitioners.

The issues defining and surrounding research and practice on fathers and families are complex. Nested in each issue are multiple layers of questions about the problems facing young fathers, mothers, and families; the needs of programs and the practitioners who work in them; changes in national, state, and local policies; and the nature of the tasks facing society. Although there is substantial discussion about the impact of father absence, research studies provide only modest evidence for the negative consequences of father absence on children and typically attribute these negative effects to reduced family income resulting from separation or divorce. There are only sparse data on families that deviate from “traditional, intact” family forms such as families headed by adolescent or young, adult never-married, and/or poor mothers. Research on families of color, outside of poverty studies, are conspicuously absent from the knowledge base.

The work of the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) uses the strengths and voids in these research discussions as a launching pad to develop a framework for research, practice, and policy—to promote the building of a field in which the needs of children and families are the core of the discourse and research and practice cohere to craft the language and activities associated with that discourse. NCOFF aims to bring together these issues within a research and collaborative effort on behalf of children and their families.

Established in July 1994 with core funding from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, NCOFF's mission is to improve the life chances of children and the efficacy of families by facilitating the effective involvement of fathers. Developed in the spirit of the Philadelphia Children's Network's (PCN) motto, “Help the children. Fix the system.”, NCOFF seeks to increase and enrich the possibilities for children, ensuring that they are helped and that the system allows for and encourages the participation of fathers in their children's lives. NCOFF shares with PCN and other field

activities the premises that children need loving, nurturing families; that mothers and families in general need to be supported in providing nurturance; and that family support efforts should increase the ability of both parents and adults within and outside the biological family to contribute to children's development and well-being.

NCOFF's mission is developed around seven **Core Learnings**, distilled from the experiences of PCN and confirmed thus far in our work as being consistent with the experiences of other programs and agencies serving fathers. These Core Learnings are:

1. Fathers care—even if that caring is not always shown in conventional ways;
2. Father presence matters—in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development;
3. Joblessness is a major impediment to family formation and father involvement;
4. Existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment operate to create obstacles and disincentives to father involvement. The disincentives are sufficiently compelling as to have prompted the emergence of a phenomenon dubbed “underground fathers”—men who acknowledge paternity and are involved in the lives of their children but who refuse to participate as fathers in the formal systems;
5. A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the vital skills to share the responsibility for parenting;
6. The transition from biological father to committed parent has significant developmental implications for young fathers; and
7. The behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices within families of origin.

The Core Learnings provide the context for NCOFF's basic research which is designed to synthesize work from multiple disciplines, provide current analyses, and examine emerging conceptualizations in the field. NCOFF recognizes that the scope of need in the field requires a variety of approaches and the commitment and collective effort of different communities. The NCOFF research agenda is intended to support the field in the development, conduct, and advancement of research, practice, and responsive policies.

This Monograph is intended to highlight critical and emerging topics in the field that have received minimal attention and that complement issues identified in the NCOFF Research Databases and the critical literature reviews. The Databases combine citation lists, annotated bibliographies, and abstracts of research articles, reports, and volumes that focus on issues implied in the Core Learnings. The critical literature reviews have been written and reviewed by scholars representing multiple disciplines and research interests in fathers and families. Information about the NCOFF Databases, the literature reviews and analysis, working papers, and other NCOFF docu-

ments and activities is currently available on HandsNet.

Embedded in NCOFF's mission is a vision in which fathers, families, and communities are positioned to ensure the well-being of children and are able to translate their hope and the possibilities that accompany that hope into human and social prosperity. A well-coordinated national effort on fathers and families will give support and a collective voice to programs, encourage research, and contribute to responsive policy formulation. Such a vehicle would provide the appropriate context for experience-sharing among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers; identification of basic research, program, and policy-related issues; surfacing of new research issues; and increased opportunities for communication, cooperation, and collaboration.

*Vivian L. Gadsden*  
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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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# INTRODUCTION

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## **Transitions in the Life-Course of African-American Males: Issues in Schooling, Adulthood, Fatherhood, and Families**

Parker is a bright, strong, and determined young African American father. He attended high school in Philadelphia where he says that he was led to believe (through teachers' verbal reinforcement) that he was performing well. For the past four years, Parker has participated in a fathers program, not because he was unengaged with or irresponsible towards his son but because he wanted to strengthen his relationship with him, file for custody, and increase the opportunities available to his son and to himself. As a twenty year-old African American male, Parker provides for the daily care of his child, with some assistance from his mother; works at a job which he has had for over a year; and is preparing to continue his education. He is engaged actively in the life of his child, despite the absence of his own father during his childhood. Over the years, Parker has tried to locate his life experiences, goals, dreams, despair, and hope within the history and culture of African American families in which fathers supported their children through caring, nurturing, and economic support. He pursues his quest through reading, despite an education of questionable quality, and through the support of male peer and older male resources who help him navigate his way through the freewieldedness and turbulence of adolescence that often act as barriers to responsive fatherhood and adulthood. Parker has begun the transition from biological father to committed parent.

We begin this monograph with the vignette from the real life of Parker because this portrait captures much of the complexity of the experiences of African American males and the discussions about African American fathers. Parker's experiences are not representative of all African American males but may point to a common set of circumstances, encounters, and school histories shared by all African American males, irrespective of social class. While Parker may have been better protected had he come from a middle-class home, his experiences may not have been substantially different, as countless articles and commentaries in the popular press and anecdotal evidence in research reports suggest. The negative images of African American males are so widespread and embedded in public perception that a middle-class African American male is as likely to suffer from a lack of encouragement in education as an African American male living in poverty.

Parker fits many of the stereotypical images of African American males; for example, he was an adolescent father, he dropped out of school, and he grew up in a female-headed household. He embodies many of the concerns of African American boys and men in both middle and low-income homes. Over the course of his life, he has been in schools that identified him as academically talented but could not or did not invest in that talent. He has grown up with little knowledge of or contact with his father. He has begun to "put his life on track" to attain the kind

of measurable success valued by society. Although he has assumed responsibility for the upbringing of his child, he has few social supports outside of the fathers program which he attends. In short, Parker, like millions of young men from a variety of cultural and ethnic groups and social classes, must make major life decisions while struggling with the attractiveness of adolescent freedom and the expectations of adulthood and fatherhood. Unlike many of the other young men, Parker's decisions affects not only himself but also his child. In addition, Parker is at enormous risk for unemployment, living in poverty, and wrestling with the demands of parenting in the face of limited resources. He is at a critical juncture in his life-course, which is already strained by unfulfilled promises.

The problems facing Parker and other African American males in school, home, and other social contexts have been amply highlighted in both research reports and policy discussions. Much of the recent focus on African American males, however, has been based in policy discussions about family support, welfare reform, and young fathers' participation in their children's development. Despite heightened interest in African American male development over the past decade, relatively little research or practice examines the specific contexts in which African American males grow, focuses on ways in which they negotiate their environments, or provides a coherent set of program features to support educational and social development. Yet, studies have found that as early as kindergarten, African American boys are treated differently from White boys, White girls, and, in many cases, from African American girls in classroom settings. Research from classroom studies also suggest that teachers allow boys more freedom than girls and are more tolerant of aversive behavior by boys, except in the case of African American boys who are seen as disruptive, overactive, and intellectually diminished (Slaughter-Defoe and Richards, 1995).

The challenges facing African American males begin long before they enter school and continue throughout their life-span. What is perhaps one of the most difficult relationships to unravel, however, is the intergenerational effect of difficult childhoods, poverty, and father absence for growing numbers of African American males whose school experiences leave them disengaged from learning or unprepared to enter and achieve success in the workplace. The implications of poor education and joblessness for disproportionately high numbers of African American males are far too often experienced painfully by their children and the mothers of their children. The social expectations of men as providers and lack of knowledge about how to "make it" in society conspire against many of these men's active involvement in their children's lives, even when they demonstrate their caring.

The papers in this monograph were presented in a symposium on African American fathers at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association in April 1995. These papers attempt to probe at themes in the seven Core Learnings of the National Center on Fathers and Families, particularly those issues implied in Core Learnings 1 (fathers care), 3 (joblessness), and 6 (role transitions). The papers aim to connect the issues across school, work, and personal development that contribute to African American male experiences and the transition into fatherhood. In the first paper, James Davis and Will Jordan examine how schools structure



students' opportunities for learning. Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, Davis and Jordan provide preliminary analyses of key issues affecting the transition of African American males from middle school to high school completion.

In the second paper, Philip Bowman discusses the culture of African American maleness and the role of educational programs in promoting and modeling responsible behavior and preparing African American males for the demands of society. Bowman suggests that although some of the problems lie in the home and family, many of the difficulties can be attributed to schools which do not assist African American males in developing appropriate problem-solving abilities or provide them with an adequate education to assume responsibility for supporting themselves and their children. He outlines a model that includes a range of unresolved issues in the study of African American male development and fatherhood.

Vivian Gadsden and Ralph Smith in the third paper examine the complex circumstances that face many African American males in the transition from childhood to fatherhood. The paper is based on observations and interviews with practitioners and young fathers and subsumes within five major issues the problems young fathers face in confronting their educational limitations, grappling with the developmental demands of young adulthood, and reconciling their self-perceptions as men with the social expectations of them as fathers. The discussion builds on data from young fathers programs to frame research and policy imperatives. The three papers are followed by two commentaries, written by Deborah Johnson and Ed Pitt, one representing a research perspective and the other providing a critical review from practice on the issues raised in the papers.

In conceptualizing this manuscript, we were deeply aware of the importance of presenting an accurate picture but deeply concerned that this picture not exclude possibility. We were reminded throughout the project and as we talked with young fathers that their life issues and experiences as African American boys and fathers are multifaceted, problematic, and influenced significantly by their relationship with families, schools, workplaces, and social institutions, each with different kinds and levels of investments.

We were interested in discussing not only negative public perceptions but also findings from research—work that is too limited in number and scope. Perhaps the most critical stance in this monograph addresses the small body of research on African American males, the modest examination of African American fathers and other fathers of color in traditional research discourses, and the need for practice issues to be contextualized in research.

The harsh though realistic portraits of the conditions of African American males as learners and fathers create openings for hope and possibility. The intricate nature of the work on this population is tied to the ability of researchers, practitioners, policymakers, families, and African American boys and fathers themselves to translate possibility into opportunities within schools and workplaces, thereby transforming inappropriate and unsupportive structures and systems. It is our hope that this monograph informs the broader discourses in research, practice, and policy communities about fathers and families and highlights the less discussed but equally dramatic accounts of the struggles of committed young fathers and their vulnerable children. This monograph is intended to contribute to increased understanding of the needs of children and families and the shared challenges of institutions and policies that are designed to provide support to these families.

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# Determinants of School Success Among African American Males<sup>1</sup>

*James Earl Davis*

*Will J. Jordan*

There has been increasing concern about the degree to which African American males seemingly continue to lose ground within critical arenas of society, most notably the labor force and education. Discussions about the life chances of Black males and the nature of their precarious social status are infused with compelling metaphors such as “endangered species” and “epidemic of failure” (Gibbs, 1988; Garibaldi, 1992). For most people, economic success is closely linked to school success, and failure in school contributes to limited economic opportunities as adults (Tinto, 1987). When given a fair chance to learn and succeed, schooling remains for poor, Black, and disenfranchised people one of the few vehicles for upward mobility. However, it comes as no surprise that schools, like other mainstream social institutions, have not been a level playing field for Black males (MacLeod, 1987). Research has demonstrated that Blacks place great faith in public schools, only to be let down time and again.<sup>2</sup> Decades ago, researchers found evidence that schools do not only neglect the social, emotive, and developmental needs of Black children and adolescents but are in fact abusing them (Brophy & Good, 1974). For many at-risk Black youth, schools ignore their aspirations, disrespect their ability to learn, and fail to assess and cultivate their many talents. Within the context of the prevailing conditions of schools, many Black adolescents simply concede, beaten by a system which places little value on them.

Although Black girls and boys are both affected by this social machine, some researchers suggest that the troubles facing Black boys are more chronic and deserve special attention (Leake & Leake, 1992; Polite, 1993; Reed, 1988; Sanders & Reed, 1995). They point to the public’s images of the Black male as violent, conniving, disrespectful, and unintelligent. These images not only carry over into schools, affecting how Black males are treated, but may influence the opportunity structures available to them. The work of Garibaldi (1992) and Jaynes and Williams (1989), for example, provides some evidence that in many schools Black males are found disproportionately at the bottom of the achievement scale. According to Garibaldi (1992), in almost every category of academic failure (e.g., low achievement, grade retention, and suspensions), Black males are overrepresented. The common sentiment is that this social reality is neither accidental nor a random occurrence. Much of the research on the schooling experiences of Black males, however, has been neither data-centered nor theoretically driven. This work has included case studies, quasi-experiments, and small-scale studies that inform our understanding of the plight of Black males but provide little information about the scope of the problem.

In the present paper, we aim to provide some statistical grounding for the discussion on African American males by using national longitudinal data from a representative sample of Black males in secondary school. The paper represents a preliminary effort to develop a causal model of factors influencing the school success and failure of adolescent Black males. Our analyses focus on the relationships of teacher and school characteristics to the

academic performance and affective outcomes of their Black students. The results are descriptive primarily of the pattern of relationships among social processes in secondary school and serve as the first step in building a causal model for understanding Black male success.

## ***Method Of Analysis***

The data used for this brief analysis come from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988 (NELS:88). NELS:88 allows researchers to examine the contextual and structural conditions of schools as they affect students' levels of achievement and their social and psychological development. The NELS:88 design involved a stratified, random sample of 25,000 8th graders in some 1,000 schools who were followed through high school and surveyed in successive waves at two-year intervals. In addition to student surveys and achievement tests, the students' parents, teachers, and principals were also surveyed. The present study examines the full subsample of Black males at grades 8 and 10 (N=1,500).

*Dependent variables in the study.* We analyzed four outcomes for Black males: (1) school engagement, (2) locus of control, (3) achievement, and (4) course grades. Items about school engagement and locus of control measure the attitudes and self-perceptions of the respondents. The School Engagement indicators consist of a six-item composite scale that examines the degree to which students perceive school as a place where they are valued personally and where they contribute to the school's strengths. Items on the scale included statements such as "Students get along well with teachers," "The teaching is good," "Teachers are interested in students," and "When I work hard on my schoolwork, teachers praise my efforts."

Locus of control consists of a six-item scale that asks students to describe their feelings of personal agency within school and other life contexts. Items included statements such as "I don't have enough control over the direction my life is taking," "Every time I try to get ahead, something or somebody stops me," and "When I make plans, I am almost certain I can make them work."

Achievement test scores and test grades provide a measure against which respondents' self-perceptions and attitudes can be compared. The three achievement items measure average scores on standardized tests in history, science, and mathematics. The course grades measure is comprised of students' average grades in mathematics, English, science, and history.

*Independent variables in the analysis.* The core independent variables fall into two general categories. We refer to the first as school context variables and the second as school experiences and social background characteristics. Student level variables were used as statistical controls. School context includes descriptions of the school setting and teachers' behaviors, attitudes, work demands on, and expectations of students. Specific items include teachers'

expectancies, preparedness, absenteeism, morale, locus of control, stress of discipline, level of difficulty in motivating students, academic workload, and urbanicity, as well as the school's daily attendance rate, school-level socioeconomic status (SES), number of Black teachers, average class size, and percentage of students in college preparatory classes.

Student background characteristics include SES, prior learning (Grade 8 Reading Achievement), daily attendance, study habits, math and science coursework, remedial work in math or science, number of suspensions, and grade retention. The effects of the selected school contextual and structural factors on the four outcome measures are presented in Tables 1 through 4. The primary purpose of these regression analyses is to explore variations in the effects of the contextual and structural factors within and across grade level for Black males. The initial analyses presented for 8th and 10th grade students include only school-related factors without controls; the second regression for each grade level includes control variables.

**Table 1. Effects of School Context, Structure, and Experiences on Black Male Composite Achievement (Math, Science, and History)**

		<u>Middle School (8th Grade)</u>				<u>High School (10th Grade)</u>			
		<u>B</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>t</u>
ACADEMIC WORKLOAD		.05	1.68	.03	1.28	.11**	2.48**	.03	1.04
URBANICITY		-.06	-1.71	-.06*	-2.46*	.10*	2.13*	.03	0.81
ATTENDANCE RATE	.08**	2.39**	.01	0.24	.12*	2.32*	.03	0.54	
SCHOOL SES-PROXY	-.06*	-1.90*	-.01	-0.38	-.03	-0.53	.00	0.05	
# BLACK TEACHERS	-.11**	-3.41**	-.02	-0.67	-.15**	-3.01**	-.06	-1.65	
DISCIPLINE STRESSED		-.11**	-3.56**	-.04*	-2.00**	-.15**	-3.40**	-.04	-1.13
CLASS SIZE		.18**	6.04**	.04	1.67	.11**	2.42**	.01	0.22
TEACHER COOPERATION		.03	0.83	.02	0.84	-.06	1.46	.00	0.01
TEACHER RESPONSIBILITY						-.07	-1.63	-.05	-1.68
COLLEGE PREP						-.01	-0.14	.03	1.04
DROPOUT RATE						-.00	-0.09	.00	0.06
TEACHERS PRESSURE									
STUDENTS						-.01	-0.19	-.03	-0.80
TEACHER EXPECTANCIES						.09	1.59	.04	0.92
STUDENTS DIFFICULT TO									
MOTIVATE		-.14**	-4.57**	-.06**	-2.63**				
TEACHER PREPAREDNESS		.02	0.62	-.02	-0.93				
TEACHER ABSENCES	-.08*	-2.26*	-.07*	-3.46**					
TEACHER MORALE						.05	1.09	.05	1.42
<u>TEACHER LOCUS OF CONTROL (-)</u>						-.13**	-2.85**	-.07*	-2.02*
STUDY HABITS				.05**	2.21**				
STUDENTS ABSENCES				-.05**	-2.43**				
MATH COURSEWORK						-.01	-0.30		
SCIENCE COURSEWORK								.00	0.04
REMEDIATED IN MATH-ENGLISH (-)								.13**	3.89**
# SUSPENSIONS								-.07*	-2.30*
RETAINED/BIRTH YEAR				-.07**	-3.23**		.12**	3.80*	
PRIOR LEARNING (READING)				.64**	29.08**	.56**	16.75**		
SES BACKGROUND				.11**	4.92**		.13**	3.39**	
Multiple R	.331	.751			.395	.767			
R <sup>2</sup>	.109	.564			.156	.589			
Standard Error	20.723	14.53			7.456	5.243			

\*p <.05      \*\*p<.01

**Table 2. The Effects of School Context, Structure, and Experiences on Black Male Composite Grades**

	<u>Middle School (8th Grade)</u>				<u>High School (10th Grade)</u>			
	<u>B</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>t</u>
ACADEMIC WORKLOAD	.07**	2.40**	.06*	2.02*	-.02	-0.43	-.05	-1.13
URBANICITY	-.01	-0.38	-.02	-0.47	.01	0.19	-.00	-0.03
ATTENDANCE RATE	.14**	4.25**	.10	3.19	.01	0.17	-.00	-0.04
SCHOOL SES-PROXY	.01	0.78	.01	0.27	-.02	-0.31	-.01	-0.19
# BLACK TEACHERS	-.06	-1.78	.01	0.18	.00	0.06	.03	0.51
DISCIPLINE STRESSED	-.04	-1.19	-.01	-0.19	-.02	-0.54	.01	0.26
CLASS SIZE	.08**	2.45**	-.01	-0.30	.05	1.07	.01	0.12
TEACHER COOPERATION	-.04	-1.13	-.03	-1.06	-.03	-0.62	-.02	-0.33
TEACHER RESPONSIBILITY					-.01	-0.25	.01	0.13
COLLEGE PREP					-.09	-2.00	-.07	-1.54
DROPOUT RATE					-.02	-0.38	-.01	-0.23
TEACHERS PRESSURE								
STUDENTS					-.01	-0.24	-.01	-0.23
TEACHER EXPECTANCIES					.12*	2.07*	.10	1.69
STUDENTS DIFFICULT TO								
MOTIVATE	-.05	-1.46	.01	0.17				
TEACHER PREPAREDNESS	.01	0.16	.00	0.10				
TEACHER ABSENCES	.04	1.35	.03	0.97				
TEACHER MORALE					.01	0.27	.02	0.30
<u>TEACHER LOCUS OF CONTROL (-)</u>					-.03	-0.62	.00	0.04
STUDY HABITS			.03	1.05				
STUDENTS ABSENCES			-.11**	-3.78**				
MATH COURSEWORK					.01	0.23		
SCIENCE COURSEWORK							.04	0.85
REMEDIED IN MATH-ENGLISH (-)							.04	0.90
# SUSPENSIONS							-.17**	-3.67**
RETAINED/BIRTH YEAR			-.17**	-5.59**			.06	1.29
PRIOR LEARNING (READING)			.21**	6.97**			.12*	2.30*
SES BACKGROUND			.09**	2.97**			.02	0.47
Multiple R	.210	.410		.169	.297			
R <sup>2</sup>	.044		.168		.028		.088	
Standard Error	.680		.636		1.405		1.371	

\*p <.05    \*\*p<.01

**Table 3: The Effects of School Context, Structure, and Experiences on Black Male Locus of Control**

	Middle School (8th Grade)				High School (10th Grade)			
	B	t	B	t	B	t	B	t
ACADEMIC WORKLOAD	-.01	-0.36	-.02	-0.74	.01	0.25	-.02	-0.41
URBANICITY	-.03	-0.97	-.03	-0.98	.06	1.18	.05	0.97
ATTENDANCE RATE .05	1.43	.01	0.45		-.04	-0.74	-.07	-1.30
SCHOOL SEX-PROXY -.02	-0.61	-.00	-0.11		-.15**	-2.82**	-.13**	-2.47**
#BLACK TEACHERS	.00	0.13	.05	1.58	.01	0.18	.02	0.50
DISCIPLINE STRESSED	-.04	-1.35	-.02	-0.61	-.06	-1.25	-.03	-0.60
CLASS SIZE	.12**	3.92**	.06	1.86	-.04	-0.78	-.08	-1.69
TEACHER COOPERATION	-.03	-0.82	-.03	-0.83	.01	0.27	.04	0.75
TEACHER RESPONSIBILITY					.00	0.07	.01	0.28
COLLEGE PREP					-.06	-1.32	-.05	-1.07
DROPOUT RATE					.06	1.13	.06	1.06
TEACHERS PRESSURE								
STUDENTS					-.01	-0.15	-.01	-0.17
TEACHER EXPECTANCIES					.01	0.16	.09	1.76
STUDENTS DIFFICULT TO								
MOTIVATE	-.06*	-2.02*	-.03	-0.95				
TEACHER PREPAREDNESS	-.03	-1.22	-.04	-1.41				
TEACHER ABSENCES -.01	-0.19	-.01	-0.41					
TEACHER MORALE					.09	1.64	-.05	-0.92
TEACHER LOCUS OF CONTROL (-)					-.01	-0.11	-.01	-0.17
STUDY HABITS			.05	1.52				
STUDENTS ABSENCES			-.10**	-3.37**				
MATH COURSEWORK						-.01	-0.17	
SCIENCE COURSEWORK							-.05	-0.92
REMEDiated IN MATH-ENGLISH (-)							.08	1.76
#SUSPENSIONS							-.80	-1.69
RETAINED/BIRTH YEAR			-.07**	-2.40*			.02	0.37
PRIOR LEARNING (READING)			-.18**	5.65**			.21**	4.15**
SES BACKGROUND			.07*	2.05*			-.01	-0.19
Multiple R	.166	.311		.182		.307		
R <sup>2</sup>	.027		.097		.033		.307	
Standard Error	.594		.574		.648		.632	

\*p <.05      \*\*p<.01

**Table 4. The Effects of School Context, Structure, and Experiences on Black Male Engagement (-)**

	<u>Middle School (8th Grade)</u>				<u>High School (10th Grade)</u>			
	<u>B</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>t</u>
ACADEMIC WORKLOAD	.01	0.18	.00	0.13	-.06	-1.32	-.05	-1.03
URBANICITY	.02	0.70	.02	0.60	-.90	-1.77	-.11*	-2.06*
ATTENDANCE RATE	-.06	-1.77	-.06	-1.80	-.15**	-2.65**	-.16**	-2.28**
SCHOOL SES-PROXY	.05	1.61	.06	1.77	.05	0.89	.04	0.74
# BLACK TEACHERS	-.03	-0.82	-.02	-0.62	.01	0.18	.02	0.30
DISCIPLINE STRESSED	-.00	-0.11	-.00	-0.14	.06	1.21	.06	1.18
CLASS SIZE	.01	0.30	.01	0.22	.09	1.86	.10*	2.18*
TEACHER COOPERATION	.01	0.16	.01	0.40	-.06	-1.36	-.07	-1.42
TEACHER RESPONSIBILITY					-.01	-0.23	-.03	-0.57
COLLEGE PREP					.02	0.54	.02	0.37
RATE					-.06	-1.00	-.06	-1.02
TEACHERS PRESSURE								
STUDENTS					-.04	-0.73	-.05	-0.86
TEACHER EXPECTANCIES					.03	0.47	.02	0.35
STUDENTS DIFFICULT TO								
MOTIVATE	-.05	-1.54	-.04	-1.34				
TEACHER PREPAREDNESS	-.04	-1.19	-.03	-0.87				
TEACHER ABSENCES	.02	0.71	.02	0.50				
TEACHER MORALE					-.07	-1.32	-.06	-1.21
<u>TEACHER LOCUS OF CONTROL (-)</u>					-.02	-0.48	-.03	-0.63
STUDY HABITS			-.13**	-4.36**				
STUDENTS ABSENCES			.00	0.11				
MATH COURSEWORK						-.02	-0.32	
SCIENCE COURSEWORK							-.02	-0.41
REMEDIED IN MATH-ENGLISH (-)							-.01	-0.17
# SUSPENSIONS							.14**	2.92**
RETAINED/BIRTH YEAR			-.01	-0.18			-.09	-1.77
PRIOR LEARNING (READING)			.03	0.91			-.03	-0.51
SES BACKGROUND			.04	1.18			.14*	2.56**
MULTIPLE R		.109		.178	.222	.288		
R <sup>2</sup>		.011		.031	.049	.083		
STANDARD ERROR		.454		.451	.424	.402		

\*p < .05    \*\*p < .01



## ***Summary of Key Findings***

### **Black Males in Middle School**

Several important contextual and structural factors were found to influence African American male academic achievement. These factors were urbanicity, emphasis on discipline, inability of teachers to motivate students, and absenteeism among teachers. Our results suggest that urban Black males in middle school are worse off than their suburban and rural counterparts with regard to achievement. When discipline is stressed and teachers have difficulty motivating students, Black males perform poorly. We also found that among the independent variables, teachers' absenteeism had the strongest association with Black male achievement, indicating that poor performance among Black males was often symptomatic of the failure of teachers to show up for work.

Along with these contextual/structural influences on Black male achievement in middle school, each of the student experience and background controls were found to affect achievement. Students who study long and hard do better, as do those who have performed well in the past and those from middle-class families. Conversely, poor attendance and grade retention were key contributors to poor performance among Black males.

In our analysis of factors influencing the grades Black male students received in middle school, the core finding was that teachers who assign more homework tend also to issue higher grades. None of the other contextual/structural variables were statistically significant alongside the controls. Although schoolwide attendance rates appeared to influence grades strongly prior to the addition of controls, these rates became insignificant once control variables were included.

In conjunction with the rates of attendance at the school-level, Black male attendance as an individual student-level variable also played an important role in middle school performance. In this study, absenteeism among Black males was shown to be partly responsible for poor grades. Additionally, being retained had an even greater negative effect on grades Black males received for subsequent performance.

In middle school, contextual and structural variables appear to have little influence on African American male engagement in school activities. In this analysis, only one variable, study habits, was found to have a significant influence on engagement in school. As expected, Black males who work and study harder were more likely to be engaged; that is, teachers were able to motivate them and cultivate their academic interest in middle school.

In our analysis of factors influencing Black male middle-school students' locus of control, the core finding was that larger class sizes positively influence locus of control. Also, teachers' perceptions of students as being difficult to motivate had a negative effect on student locus of control. However, when control variables were included, these two variables did not significantly influence the locus of control of Black male middle schoolers. Student background variables, however, did appear to influence locus of control. For instance, retaining students in a grade had a negative effect on locus of control, while prior learning had a positive effect. Black males from high SES backgrounds had higher levels of locus of control in middle school than Black males from low SES backgrounds.

## **Black Males in High School**

In high school, the effects of most of the contextual/structural characteristics we examined were eliminated once controls were introduced. However, teachers' locus of control was found to be related to poor high school performance among Black males. In other words, when teachers' perception of accountability for the success or failure of their students was low, Black males' performance dropped. This may have occurred because of teachers' perceived inability to effect change in their students' lives, which are often severely constrained by social and economic barriers.

None of the contextual/structural factors we examined seemed to influence the grades Black male high school students received except teacher expectancies which was weakly associated with grades. Teachers with high expectations of students appeared to give better grades, but this relationship dropped below significance when controls were added. Two of the student experience variables, prior learning and suspensions, had a modest impact on high school grades. We found that black male students who performed well in middle school received better high school grades. Conversely, being suspended has a stronger negative association with high school grades for Black males. The more often the student was suspended, the greater the negative effect on his grades.

Only minor variations were found in the effects of contextual and structural factors for high school students. School-level attendance rate was found to affect engagement before control variables were introduced. Schools with higher attendance and smaller class sizes were found to have more engaged Black males; however, Black males in urban schools in general did not fare well. In addition to these variables, two student background control variables were found to affect school engagement: (1) number of suspensions and (2) SES background.

In high school, the effects of most of the variables examined in this study were negligible. Locus of control of high school students was only significantly influenced by one contextual/structural variable: the SES level of students attending a specific high school. African American males in lower SES high schools appeared to have lower scores on locus of control. We also found that students from middle-class families were more likely to have diminished locus of control. Surprisingly, middle-class Black males were less likely to have feelings of personal control in high school, relative to their lower SES peers. While this student background variable was not significant, its direction was negative for high school students and may reflect anxiety among middle-class high school students about parental and community expectations about achievement. We also found that students' prior learning was related to locus of control. This finding suggests that when Black males have sound skills and prior achievement, they have a better sense of their ability to control life's conditions.

## ***Discussion***

The purpose of these analyses was to commence an investigation, using national data, on various school contextual and structural factors affecting Black male success in middle school and in high school. The existing research literature offered little guidance in our inquiry; few studies have focused on gaining a better understanding of the condition of the education of Black males by using national data summaries. We examined several critical factors in the education of Black young males, measuring their relative importance against school experiences and family background characteristics. The pattern of results revealed important correlates and relationships which may be the building blocks for a causal model of core factors influencing Black male achievement in secondary schools. These factors may be used as a vehicle to design strategies to improve Black male success. For example, we found several important outcomes in middle schools: (1) Black males in urban areas have lower achievement than those elsewhere; (2) an emphasis on discipline in the classroom is associated with lower achievement; and (3) teachers who assign more work seem to give higher course grades.

There are several possible explanations for why Black male achievement is lower in urban middle schools than in suburban or rural schools. These reasons include, for example, widespread decay of urban schools and the presence of broader social problems which impede performance motivation among Black males. Urban schools, particularly those in poverty-stricken areas, are frequently neglected, improperly funded, and mismanaged. Urban schools in low-income areas have traditionally been underfunded and burdened with limited parental and community economic support (Kozol, 1991; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Payne, 1993). Because of complex social and economic reasons, some argue that young, Black males in urban settings are particularly at-risk for life-long economic failure in addition to low school achievement and success (Ferguson, 1994; Mincy, 1994).

Another middle school finding was that teachers who assign more homework also give higher grades. We believe that this finding is related to teachers' general expectations of students. Teachers who demand greater effort and performance of students, as the data suggest, are more likely to reward students with higher grades. These teachers may believe that their students are not only capable of academic rigor but are also worthy of grades denoting their success. Conversely, lower grading teachers may lack confidence in their students' abilities, hold lower expectations of them, or both. Perhaps these teachers assign little homework because of a perception that students will not or can not complete it, or teachers may give low grades because they do not deem the students' work worthy of higher grades.

In high school, teachers' locus of control—the degree to which teachers feel a sense of accountability and responsibility for the success of their students—was found to be associated positively with the academic achievement of Black males. Although the effect of an emphasis on discipline, number of Black teachers, teachers' expectations, and several other contextual/ structural factors were near significance in relation to Black male achievement, all but locus of control were eliminated by controls. This suggests that teachers who take responsibility for the quality of education they provide their students usually inspire higher classroom achievement among adolescent Black males.

# **EDUCATION AND RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS: Socialization, Mobilization and Allocation Challenges**

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Existing literature on fathers and families consistently reveals that most African American males have sought to be responsible fathers, at times against incredible odds (Billingsley, 1992; Bowman, 1993; Staples, 1993). To be sure, this evidence collides with popular beliefs and common stereotypes about the persistent tendencies of African American fathers toward irresponsibility. Even during the chattel slavery period, our best historical evidence shows that African American men on plantations somehow managed to respond in surprisingly adaptive ways to discouraging restrictions on responsible fatherhood (e.g. Blassingame, 1972; Gutman, 1976). This pattern of responsible fatherhood continued within African American families during the post-slavery era (Frazier, 1939; Berry and Blassingame, 1982; Wilkinson and Taylor, 1977). Father presence and responsibility were the norm on both southern tenant farms under Jim Crow laws and, during the subsequent Industrial Period, within working-class families in northern cities.

This remarkable history of responsible fatherhood despite restricted opportunities makes recent post-industrial reversals even more striking (e.g. Farley and Allen, 1987; Jaynes and Williams, 1989). Since the early 1970s, when the labor market base shifted from industrial to information and service jobs, indicators of responsible fatherhood among African American men have reversed dramatically and continue to decline. As we approach the 21st century, alarming statistics mark a troubling and unprecedented historical trend: increasing numbers of African American fathers are absent from their children's households, fail to provide them with economic support, and provide little father-child socialization.

In this paper, I aim to clarify the role of education in addressing the growing challenge of responsible fatherhood among African Americans. Attention is given from the outset to the instrumental and expressive aspects of difficulties experienced by African American fathers. The analysis in this paper is based on the premise that successful schooling is the cornerstone for gainful employment which in turn promotes responsible fatherhood. However, links between education and responsible fatherhood among African Americans are complicated in post-industrial urban ecologies by pervasive job dislocation and cultural erosion.

The paper is divided into two sections. The first examines some of the current educational issues among African American males. This discussion is followed by a critical analysis of competing educational interventions at the center of emerging debates. Building on this analysis, an integrative model helps to clarify specific mechanisms through which education can promote responsible instrumental and expressive roles among African American fathers.

## ***EDUCATION AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES:***

### **Reform Models, Agendas, and Assumptions**

Much has been written about the growing crisis in education and the assumption of major life roles among African American males, especially in inner cities (i.e., Bowman, 1988, 1989, 1990). The crisis in education and schooling is pivotal to discussions about African American males because this crisis exacerbates risks for joblessness, crime, and other problems which restrict responsible family roles as they move from adolescence to the adult years. Educational attainment of Black males is not only far behind that of Whites, but an expanding gender gap has resulted in Black males' falling further behind Black females in recent years. Moreover, their educational difficulties are especially acute in high-risk, inner-city neighborhoods. Despite coming from the same family background as Black female students, Black male students seem to experience greater school problems than Black females as early as the fourth grade, with difficulties increasing during the middle school and high school transitions. For example, the African American male drop-out rate in urban public schools is catastrophic, reaching 72 percent in New York High Schools (Riley, 1986)<sup>1</sup>. Even when Black males do graduate from high school, they are more likely to have low levels of literacy and less likely to enter or complete college (Hatchett, 1986; Ferguson, 1994). A recent study by the American Council on Education (1994) found that the decline continues into postsecondary education, with the number of African American males in college dropping five percentage points from 1990 to 1993.

Debates on corrective action continue, and there is no consensus on the most viable policy agenda or intervention to improve the educational trends among African American males. Growing debates about educational reform seldom address the special risk of Black males and are marked by conflicting assumptions. As illustrated in Table 1, existing educational reform models tend to fall in one of four major categories: (1) special education, (2) mainstream standards, (3) system restructuring, and (4) cultural diversity. Special education reforms focus on better ways to eliminate internal deficits within African American male students themselves. System restructuring reforms also focus on deficiencies, but the emphasis is placed on eliminating external deficits within the school system. In contrast, mainstream standards reforms focus on core national goal setting as an external mechanism to promote functional student competencies. Rather than external assets, emerging cultural diversity reforms focus on the importance of building on indigenous cultural strengths within African American students themselves. Indeed, these four types of reforms incorporate overlapping assumptions, but the tendency in each typically is to emphasize one set of assumptions at the expense of the others. Table 2 describes these four competing educational reform agendas along with underlying assumptions and related change mechanisms.

**Table 1**                      **Competing Educational Reform Agendas:**  
**Analysis of Causal Assumptions and Orientations**

C A U S A L F A C T O R S	REFORM ORIENTATION		
		DEFICITS	STRENGTHS
	INTERNAL	Special Education Reforms	Cultural Diversity Reforms
	EXTERNAL	System Restructuring Reforms	Mainstream Standards Reforms

**Table 2      Critical Analysis of Competing Educational Reform Agendas:  
Implications for African American Males and Responsible Fatherhood**

**EDUCATIONAL AGENDAS**

**Special Education Reforms**

- Special Instruction
- Alternative Schools

**Mainstream Standards Reforms**

- Literacy-Centered
- Assessment-Centered

**System Restructuring Reforms**

- Effective Schools
- System Reorganization

**Cultural Diversity Reforms**

- Multicultural
- Afrocentric

**MECHANISMS AND ASSUMPTIONS**

**Therapeutic and Remedial:**

Eliminate deep seated deficits in cognitive, emotional and social functioning

**Socialization:**

Promote core socialization goals to improve skills and competencies

**Reallocation:**

Eliminate structural deficits within individual schools and larger school system

**Mobilization:**

Build on indigenous ethnic and cultural strengths to enhance motivation and achievement



## Special Education Reforms

As America has shifted from an industrial to a post-industrial society, larger numbers of African American males in public schools are being shifted from industrial arts to special education curricula (Jones, 1991; McCarthy, 1990; Tozer, 1993). Thus, it appears that the structure of miseducation among African American males is shifting from the vocationally-oriented Booker T. Washington era to more therapeutic and punitive special education strategies. This shift to special education tracks, which is based on psychological assessments and behavioral ratings, has done little to improve the prospects of African American male students for higher education, employment, or responsible family roles. Rather, this shift to tracks for students with emotional and behavioral deficits may help to explain the increasing suspension and expulsion rates as African American males move into middle and high school.

Within this context, current *special education reform* agendas are largely incremental with emphasis on new *therapeutic* intervention modalities within classrooms and schools. Increasingly, for example, Chicago and other urban public school systems are experimenting with alternative school reforms. These new alternative schools would likely have significant numbers of African American male students who operate at the boundary between public schools and the juvenile justice system. The underlying assumption behind such special educational reform agendas is that therapeutic or punitive intervention is needed to address deep-seated deficits in the cognitive, emotional, and social functioning of African American male students.

## System Restructuring Reforms

The concept of restructuring has been used to describe a wide range of educational reforms in recent years (Lewis, 1990; Tyack and Hansot, 1988). *System restructuring* is used here in a more restrictive sense to refer to reforms involving major resource *reallocation* to promote change at the level of entire schools or school systems. Two noteworthy examples of system restructuring reforms that affect African American males are the “effective schools” effort and the system-wide school decentralization in Chicago and other large urban centers (Ayers, 1991; Comer, 1980, 1989, 1993; Edmonds, 1983). The effective schools effort is based on the assumption that the educational achievement of African American male students can be improved by addressing critical characteristics of schools such as leadership structure, teacher expectations, the creation of an orderly environment, parental involvement, and school-student relationships. System-wide decentralization, on the other hand, involves shifting the responsibility for decisionmaking to local school sites where school-parent-community teams share power to hire principals, draft school improvement plans, and control school budgets to achieve plans. However promising, the corrective effects of such broad restructuring are still unclear. Even more controversial, other new restructuring experiments such as voucher-based choice and city-to-suburban relocation reforms place much less confidence in the viability of existing inner-city schools (Marcoulides and Heck, 1991; Kaufman and Rosenbaum, 1992).



## **Mainstream Standards Reforms**

Over the past ten years, a more proactive mainstream *standards* movement has pushed for literacy-centered and assessment-centered *socialization* goals for American schools (Gadsden and Wagner, 1995; Toch, 1991; Tozer, 1993). Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton have focused on national socialization goals such as identifying a viable way to address educational risks among low-achieving students including African American males. The 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk* spurred efforts to examine the intensity of problems faced by disproportionate numbers of African American children, other children of color, and children living in poverty. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (1985) highlighted the disparity in literacy performance between Black and White students, while indicating gains in the achievement levels of African American students. The report has helped, however, to broaden the traditional conception of literacy to include a wide range of functional skills and competencies.

Recent reports reinforce these earlier findings. A 1991 U.S. Department of Labor report entitled, *What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000*, further defined the skills young people must have “to hold a decent job and earn a decent living.” The Secretary of the Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills goes beyond reading, writing, and mathematics to outline five areas of competency for students: (1) resources, (2) information, (3) interpersonal abilities, (4) social and organizational systems, and (5) technology. The 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) found more than fifty percent of respondents unable to perform basic literacy tasks, with lower rates of literacy among African American males.

A recent 1994 *Goals 2000* report focused on assessment-centered strategies to promote accountability for more efficient use of existing resources to achieve core socialization goals. With an emphasis on measurable goals and related assessment provisions, this report attempts to consolidate national standards to move every community in America to prepare its children and youth to compete in the global marketplace. This reform agenda is based on the assumption that educational risks among African American males can be addressed through mainstream socialization goal setting and related assessment strategies. However, Gadsden and Wagner (1995) note that such mainstream strategies focus inadequate attention on the conditions, contexts, institutional constraints, and interpersonal factors facing African American youth, especially males.

## **LINKS BETWEEN EDUCATION AND RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD**

### **Role of Employment, Culture, and Ecology**

The foregoing discussion suggests that the current educational crisis among African American male students continues despite growing debate over competing reform agendas. The special education focus on treatment of deep-seated deficits fails either to provide gainful employment skills or to build on indigenous cultural strengths that inspire responsibility in African American males. System restructuring reforms show more promise but fail to address broader problems in urban neighborhoods such as growing job dislocation and cultural alienation. Future educational reform efforts must address such ecological

barriers but must also prepare and socialize students to become employable in the global marketplace and to mobilize indigenous cultural supports for strong expressive family roles. Figure 1 provides a conceptual model to formulate such an integrative reform agenda that links education and responsible fatherhood among African Americans.

This educational reform model focuses on pivotal socialization, mobilization, and allocation mechanisms to promote responsible fatherhood. Emphasis is on three critical intervening links between education and responsible father roles: (1) employment, (2) culture, and (3) ecology. The education-employment link promotes instrumental father roles such as economic provider, while the education-culture link promotes expressive roles such as father-child relationships. The education-ecology link focuses on the school's role in managing the damaging aspects of high-risk, urban neighborhoods. To clarify the model, related literature on each major component is briefly highlighted.

### **Responsible Fatherhood: Instrumental and Expressive Aspects**

Existing studies still tend to depict African American fathers as essentially irresponsible (Anderson, 1990; Evans and Whitfield, 1988). In contrast, a growing number of studies on Black fathers have helped to clarify the discouraging barriers they face and the protective influence of cultural strengths (Billingsley, 1968; 1993; Bowman, 1988; 1989; Staples, 1982; 1993). Studies on responsible fatherhood have usually examined issues among Black fathers who are present in their children's household, reliable economic providers, and meaningfully involved in the socialization of their children (Allen, 1981, 1985; Bowman, 1990, 1993; Cazenave, 1979, 1981; McAdoo, 1981, 1986a, 1988). These studies highlight the importance of distinguishing between instrumental and expressive aspects of responsible fatherhood in African American families.

Instrumental dimensions of fatherhood such as the economic provider role contribute to the essential physical and social integrity of children including the provision of food, shelter, clothing, and health care. In contrast, more expressive functions such as paternal socialization help to meet socioemotional needs of children — to prepare them culturally for adulthood. Instrumental and expressive aspects of fatherhood are distinct but also interrelated, however. For example, success or failure as a family economic provider can affect the stability and quality of expressive father-child bonds. As with all fathers, Black fathers place an especially high value on the instrumental role, despite the fact that Black mothers have always been significant economic providers. Success in the economic provider role is a source of pride, but failure is particularly distressful because of the salience of this role for men's identity as fathers. Expressive roles are usually more salient for mothers, but a tradition of flexible family roles makes tasks such as childcare commonplace for Black fathers.

### **Education-Employment Link: Socialization and Instrumental Family Roles**

As suggested in Figure 1, educational reform which promotes strong education-employment linkages is especially crucial to instrumental aspects of responsible fatherhood among African American males. As a complex social institution, education has functional interconnections with other institutions such as the economy and family (Hurn, 1990; Myers and Duke, 1977). Traditionally, education has two primary socialization functions: (1) to provide individual skills for prescribed economic roles, and (2) to transmit mainstream cultural competencies for success in multiple settings.

Socialization within schools should promote education-employment links by transmitting the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary for success in the working world. Consistent with the mainstream standards reforms, such education-employment links operate to a large degree through the transmission of marketable skills and competencies. Indeed, a broad literature on both human capital and status attainment strongly support this education-employment link (Bowman, 1991; Hurn, 1993). Hence, socialization is a powerful education-employment mechanism which operates through employment skills and economic resources to promote responsible family provider role functioning among African American fathers.

### **Education-Ethnicity Link: Mobilization and Expressive Family Roles**

While the education-employment links focus on the socialization of marketable mainstream competencies, education-ethnicity links focus on the mobilization of indigenous family bonds. As shown in Figure 1, mobilization focuses on education-ethnicity links in which schools build on indigenous cultural strengths rather than merely socialize mainstream competencies. Among prospective African American fathers, educational reform which promotes education-ethnicity linkages is particularly crucial for promoting expressive roles such as strong father-child bonds. This education-ethnicity link is consistent with the growing numbers of indigenous empowerment interventions including Black male schools, classrooms, and various Afrocentric curricula plans (Ascher, 1991). For example, the plan for the Ujamaa Institute at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, New York placed an emphasis on family responsibility and centered its curriculum around African family values and values clarification. There is much less evidence available on the effectiveness of such education-ethnicity mobilization strategies than on education-employment linkages (e.g. Bowman, 1991a, 1991b).

### **Post-Industrial Urban Context: The Emerging Education-Ecology Challenge**

As illustrated in Figure 1, educational reform to promote responsible fatherhood among African Americans must also manage postindustrial barriers in the urban context. The effectiveness of both socialization and mobilization linkages can be reduced when there are pressing neighborhood barriers. For example, inner-city job displacement can impede the education-employment link as well as links between stable employment and provider role functioning. These links are rivaled by inner-city drug networks that can erode the education-culture link as well as the links between culture and father-child bonds. The emerging education-ecology challenge must find ways to cope with restrictive allocation mechanisms while promoting both education-employment and education-culture linkages.

Restrictive education-ecology allocation mechanisms operate both within schools and at a larger macroeconomic level. As discussed earlier, the differential growth among African American males in special education tracks in recent years represents a marked shift from the historical pattern of selecting and sorting these men for the industrial labor market. In line with allocation processes, African American fathers in inner cities may be more susceptible to employment difficulty due to the amount and kind of education they receive, their reliance on peers and non-school agencies for their salient knowledge and values, and

the pressure to fulfill adult roles outside of school (Myers and Duke, 1977). Hence, for African American fathers, allocation mechanisms within schools are resulting in declining levels of education, growing joblessness, and increasing difficulties in the economic provider and expressive family roles (Ferguson, 1992).

At a macroeconomic level, massive deindustrialization and the shifting of historical allocation mechanisms in recent years spurred chronic joblessness among African American males, putting them at great risk (Bowman, 1988; Sum et al., 1991; Wilson, 1987). Black males are at greatest risk for job displacement and related family problems in inner-cities for several reasons. First, they remain disproportionately employed in the most vulnerable unskilled labor and operative jobs in the face of ongoing industrial restructuring. They are also at great risk for permanent joblessness because the new jobs created require higher skills. Moreover, racial isolation within depressed central cities has resulted in poor educational resources and little access to available job options (Massey and Denton, 1993). Finally, high stress urban environments place Black males at greater risk for involvement in drugs and crime which erodes adaptive cultural resources.

## **CONCLUSION**

Contrary to popular belief, the post-industrial decline in responsible fathering among African American males stands in sharp contrast to historical patterns of African American fathering. This paper's analysis is based on the belief that education lays the foundation for responsible fathering, and the growing crisis in education for Black males and females has become a popular subject for public debate as well as for research. Special education reform agendas assume that therapeutic or punitive interventions are needed to correct deep-seated deficiencies in African American males. These kinds of reforms fail to provide fathers with the skills to fulfill the instrumental role of economic provider and fail to build on indigenous cultural strengths to encourage African American fathers in more expressive roles. System restructuring efforts focus on reallocating resources to change the way schools work. These reforms are typically experimental; the effects of these efforts are still unclear, and some of these reforms actually lower confidence in urban schools. Proponents of reforms aimed at creating mainstream standards have focused on encouraging competencies (particularly those related to future employment requirements) in all American children, including African American males. These reforms frequently overlook the special constraints facing subpopulations.

An integrative model describing the interrelationships of school, work, and culture in a community context has been proposed. This model is based on a view of fathering that relies on both instrumental and expressive functions to socialize children to become productive adults. Encouraging work-related competencies among African American males will facilitate their ability to act as responsible fathers by improving their ability to provide financial support, while building on ethnic strengths to encourage these competencies. Such competencies will reaffirm Black males' personal strengths and identity and will encourage their expressive role in their socialization of children. The success of this model in guiding effective legislation and interventions depends on understanding the model in the context of structural barriers and societal and economic forces, such as racism and deindustrialization.

1 The national drop-out rate is 14.4% for African American females and 12.6% for African American males. (Current Population Survey, 1993).

## **African American Males and Fatherhood: Issues in Research and Practice<sup>1</sup>**

*Vivian L. Gadsden*

*Ralph Smith*

**R**esearch on African American males is relatively recent and scant, and discussions about African American males both characterize and put these males “at risk.” While the actual discourses may vary slightly, discussions in the field range from controversial debates about single-gender schools and all-male educational academies (Garibaldi, 1992; Leake and Leake, 1992) to studies about the unavailability or inaccessibility of opportunity structures, irrespective of educational attainment (Anderson, 1990b; Ferguson, 1993; Sum, Fogg, Fogg and Williams, 1991). Studies that focus specifically on declining labor market opportunities point to the economic and social plights experienced by disproportionately high numbers of African American males and the difficulties they face in gaining access to higher education and well-paying employment. With increasing regularity, research and practice alike highlight the trauma that these problems portend for the welfare of African American children and families and demonstrate the ways in which these obstacles embed themselves within the school and worklife of young men and fathers.

Programs that attempt to support African American males generally have done so outside of schools. Although there is a growing emphasis on father-focused programs for African American fathers, these programs have emerged only recently as a major focus of research or policy discussions about father absence and the experiences and needs of African American men. Despite more than ten years of public discourse about these issues, research on African American boys and men pales in comparison to negative public perception of them as perpetrators of crime and violence and policy discussions suggesting that they are inherently irresponsible, erratic in behavior, and, as fathers, unable to assume the responsibilities of employment or parenting. Current welfare reform efforts and criminal justice measures, while not always naming African American males as a source of the problem, have wide-range implications for these men: in the economic support that they can provide to their families, their involvement in informal and often illegal economies to make such contributions, their high potential for incarceration, and the emotional impact of their absence in the lives of their children.

Programs focused on fathers and families contribute both settings and intellectual contexts for understanding the problems for increasing numbers of African American males, many of whom become fathers in the normal but not always typical course of adolescence and sometimes in the absence of strong educational and social supports. Using commentaries from directors of 30 programs throughout the country and data from a case study with one program serving 50 young fathers, this paper examines how programs and practitioners define the problems facing African American fathers. These programs, we



believe, are creating new texts about the role of practitioners and the possibilities for African American families—texts that not only frame critical issues confronting African American males as learners and fathers but also interrogate the quality and content of discourses in the field.

The paper is divided into four parts. We begin by reviewing research on African American male development, focusing primarily on schools and classrooms. We then examine some of the research issues on African American fathers. Next, we focus on the questions that emerged in discussions with practitioners and contextualize these issues within research. In conclusion, we highlight the major issues in the expanding effort for fathers and family support.

### **African American Males: Background Issues from Schools and Classrooms**

Conceptual and policy issues on African American males have been located in fewer than ten edited works written for academic and general audiences (e.g., Wilkerson and Taylor, 1977; Gary, 1981; Gibbs, 1988; Majors and Gordon, 1994; Mincy, 1994). The work in these volumes, although varied in focus and content, share at least three common features: (1) it attempts to bring together issues from disparate domains and disciplines into a general conversation; (2) it positions the immediate issues around education and policy, e.g., school dropout, unemployment, and crime; and (3) it presents recommendations and alternative structures for supporting African American boys and men. Educational critics such as Kunjufu (1983) and Madhubuti (1990) suggest that contemporary problems facing African American males are part of an historical plan to minimize educational and social opportunity over time. This intergenerational plight of African American boys and men is likened to a “conspiracy,” requiring multiple forms of defense (Garibaldi, 1992).

Research on African American males is located in a variety of disciplines, with no one discipline housing a significant number of studies. Within this small body of work, there are several categories. One category includes studies that focus on contextual issues in families and schools, for example, research on boys growing up in female-headed households (Broude, 1990; Mott, 1994; Santrock, 1977; Schenenga, 1983). This research, however, is as sparse and inconclusive in projecting the success of African American boys as studies examining the impact of father absence generally (see Gadsden and Philadelphia Children’s Network, 1993).

A second category consists of studies that examine psychosocial and cognitive development (e.g., Bowman and Sanders, 1988; Jackson, in press) and is divided into two domains, one that focuses primarily on schools and classrooms to understand how the experiences of young boys develop into problems during adolescence and adulthood and another that focuses on the academic behavior and achievement of African American boys within varied classroom settings (see Davis and Jordan, 1994; Polite, 1994).

A third category includes gender studies in schools or studies about classroom interactions generally. Findings from this research, particularly studies that examine the differential treatment of boys and girls, demonstrate how young African American males—especially those who are physically imposing, assertive, and active—are punished and reprimanded more often than their White male peers. Slaughter-Defoe and Richards (1995) suggest that as early as kindergarten, African American boys are treated differently from

White boys, White girls, and, to a lesser degree, African American girls. Entwisle and Hayduk (1978) found that while “White children were gentled into the system” (p. 137), Black children, Black boys in particular, were met with harsh encounters and “unreceptive schools.” This ensures, as Jackson (in press) suggests, that a self-fulfilling prophecy based on race and “differential negative feedback” occurs which Black children, and boys especially, construct as personal rejection and social unacceptance.

Another related body of research (e.g., Grant, 1985; Holliday, 1985) examines how classroom interaction and teachers’ negative perceptions influence the academic and social development of African American males. Grant (1985) in a study focused on girls found that teachers expected Black boys to be physically aggressive and that they interacted with boys in rigid and controlling ways throughout elementary school years. Teachers established rules early and reinforced on a daily basis guidelines for following the rules. In general, boys challenged teachers more than girls but Black boys and White boys challenged teachers equally often. The difference between African American boys and White boys was in the nature of the challenge: African American boys challenged around the application of rules and White boys around the assertion of facts. In short, the rule-based, disciplinary-focused classroom experiences of African American boys appear to result in their being disengaged from the academic and problem-solving discourses most valued in school. It might well be expected that the African American boys in the classrooms that Grant observed rather than associating school with exploring, constructing, and deconstructing knowledge, come to see classrooms as restrictive, holding structures where neither caring nor nurturing is apparent.

A fourth category of studies focuses on African American males as preadolescent and adolescent learners and suggests that their interest in interpersonal development and peer acceptance often exceed their interest in academic achievement (Hare and Castenell, 1985; Ogbu and Fordham, 1986). These studies point to the tension that young African American males face, similar to other youth, in gaining acceptance from their peer communities versus receiving rewards from adults. Rather than aiming for an elusive acceptance of teachers and other adults, many African American boys appear to value the social networks that school provides and to reject the intellectual challenges of schooling and the belief that schooling will make a difference in their lives. Hare and Castenell (1985) found that Black boys scored higher than Black girls and White boys on social abilities and lower on locus of control, achievement orientation, and literacy performance. Entwisle, Alexander, and Cadigan (1987) found that for African American boys, self-image was unrelated to achievement test gains, but was significant and positive for Black girls on verbal and math test performance. Ogbu and Fordham (1986) suggest that schooling precipitates a situation for Black children, particularly adolescent boys, in which their desire to achieve academically competes with their minimal expectations for “making it” in American society.

The work in this area is incisive but inconclusive, in part because it focuses on African American boys as learners once they have been socialized and stereotyped and have assumed negative roles in middle and high schools and after they have had a range of sometimes difficult experiences. While leading to questions about how schools interact with African American boys (and how African American boys respond in some settings), the work does not inform us about whether the apparent preference of African American boys for social, rather than intellectual, status is a cause or effect of unengaging classroom expe-

riences, labeling, and negative school socialization. Just as the research on early behaviors of boys versus girls is constrained by the possibility that parents socialize boys and girls differently from birth, the research on African American males in schools is constrained by our lack of knowledge about how the expectations and patterns of interactions between the boys and their teachers and the boys and their parents dictate their school behaviors, valuing of education, and life choices.

The issues facing African American males begin long before they enter school and provide challenges for them across the life-span, i.e., from adolescence into adulthood or fatherhood. The social contexts of community and culture coupled with the realities of economic need frame not only how young African American males see schooling but also determine the nature and level of their aspirations; their perceptions of male efficacy; their willingness to engage in traditional, job-seeking activities as a means to “making it”; their entry into some forms of criminal behavior; and their capacity to conceptualize adulthood, fatherhood, and the responsibilities of caring and nurturing their children (Smith, Gadsden, and Kenty, 1994).

### **Fathering and Fatherhood**

**A**lthough research on fathers in the general population has increased steadily since the 1980s, there is comparatively little work on African American fathers. Research discussions about fathers reflect the growing interest in the role of fathers, father-child interactions, and father-child attachment (e.g., Lamb, 1976, 1977; Fox, Kimmerly, and Schafer, 1991); examine adolescent fathers (e.g., Cervera, 1991; Christmon, 1990); or study problems of father absence (e.g., Furstenberg and Harris, 1993). The work on African American fathers typically focuses on the consequences of African American adolescent pregnancy and female-headed households in poverty and is rarely discussed in the larger database on father absence. In addition, traditional developmental research on men and families, like much of the research on father absence (see Gadsden and the Philadelphia Children’s Network, 1993), examines a subset of fathers and families, typically those who have been or are married to the mothers of their children and those who are middle-class, employed, or White.

Perhaps the greatest impetus for studies on African American fathers and families comes from interdisciplinary basic research which weighs heavily the economic influences in the destabilizing and breaking up of families. McAdoo and McAdoo (1994) suggest that the father’s role in the family may be a function of outside influences that “control his access to economic resources and limit his capacity to fulfill the provider role” (p. 289). This perspective also reinforces research on the meaning of work (e.g., Anderson, 1990a; Goodwin, 1972) that suggests that the majority of people across different socioeconomic and cultural/ethnic groups value work and the social access it provides. What differs across these groups apparently is the availability of opportunity and reward structures in the form of educational preparation, job training, and access to good, well-paying jobs.

Like men from other cultural and ethnic groups, African American men internalize popular notions of men “owning” in a sense the “provider role,” a view which is reinforced by societal and family expectations of men. McAdoo (1990) explains the experiences of African American fathers within the context of choice and exchange and suggests that African American fathers often choose negative roles or refuse to play some roles when



their power as providers is obviated by inaccessibility to economic and social resources. Ten years prior to McAdoo's work, Cazenave (1979) found in a two-generational study that economic security was fundamental to the ability of the African American men to become fully engaged fathers and participate actively in childrearing functions.

In an interesting shift of focus from the family and home to schools, Bowman (1994) suggests that many of the difficulties facing young African American fathers can be attributed to schools which do not assist African American boys in developing appropriate problem-solving abilities or provide them with adequate educational preparation. The failure of schools to prepare young African American boys to assume positive roles as workers and parents, he argues, contributes to the quandary in which many of these boys find themselves as young men seeking employment, entering educational programs, and making the transition to responsible fathering; the conception of the provider role and feelings of inadequacy to fulfill that role may create stress counterproductive to effective parenting, associated with unemployment and resulting in family estrangement (Bowman and Sanders, 1988).

Current research on African American fathers and practice for young fathers typically focus on adolescent, unwed fathers. Research in this area is intended to complement the work on adolescent mothers, developed around the assumption that adolescent mothers bear children for adolescent boys, an assumption challenged in studies over the past ten years (see Robinson, 1988; Lamb, in press). Studies that focus on adolescent fathers in the general population call into question the depiction of unwed fathers as fulfilling myths that Robinson (1988) describes as "super stud," "Don Juan," "Mr. Cool," and "the phantom father," images based on writings of the 1940s in which all unwed fathers were lumped together regardless of age (see Futterman and Livermore, 1947) and which provide little empirical evidence to support the stereotypes. Robinson (1988) rejects this perspective, stating that adolescent fathers in general report that they intend to provide financial support and participate in child care (see also Sonenstein, Pleck, and Ku, 1993). Because of their youth, adolescent boys often find the adjustment to fatherhood difficult. Like adolescent mothers, their premature role transition causes stresses and strains that compound tensions already inherent in adolescence. The role of the father involves decisions about the baby and separation from the peer group, and many young fathers receive little social support from their families; and domestic problems must be faced by those who live with the mother of their child(ren). The fathers show stress around coping with the pregnancy, financial responsibilities, education, employment, relationships with their partners and the parents of their partners, and parenting (Fry and Trifiletti, 1983).

There is no profile of African American unwed fathers that captures the range of issues, although a recent study by Public/Private Ventures (1994) provides compelling accounts. It is difficult to ascertain how many of the births to unwed, adolescent African American mothers involved adolescent fathers since the mothers routinely choose not to provide information about the father; the name of the father may be omitted from the birth certificate. In the past, researchers and social service workers assumed that the failure of the mother to name the father was the result of her promiscuity and thus inability to identify him. Recent data (e.g., Adams, Landsbergen, and Cobler, 1992; Danziger and Nichols-Casebolt, 1988; Wattenberg, Brewer, and Resnick, 1992) suggest that the mothers are capable of naming the father but are often unwilling to provide the information to a public record system that is as likely, if not more likely, to withhold support as offer assistance

based on this information. These feelings are often fueled by cultural beliefs and experiences that public declarations mitigate negatively against young mothers and their children needing help and against the young fathers who often are unemployed and unable to make substantial financial contributions to the support of the mother and child.

The behaviors of African American males are thought to be associated with a number of factors within African American families and communities. Marsiglio (1993) offers three theoretical positions to explain the perceptions and behaviors of African American adolescent fathers. The first is similar to those used to account for racial differences in patterns of adolescent sexual activity (Furstenberg, Morgan, Moore, and Peterson, 1987). As noted by McAdoo (1990) and Bowman and Sanders (1988), current structural models emphasize the chronically dismal economic status of many African American males and the poor economic status of African American families generally (see also Miller, 1993). Because these conditions have made it difficult for many young African American males to be reliable economic providers and have contributed to an image of young African American fathers as economic liabilities, the opportunities for family formation are more limited on average for African Americans than for Whites. A second explanation is the subcultural model in which members of the African American community (including adolescents) are said to hold less traditional views of marriage and early childbearing than Whites (Cherlin, 1981).

The third explanation combines critical elements of the structural and subcultural explanations and suggests that neighborhood segregation within African American communities may have produced a cultural climate within impoverished areas that has, in turn, fostered less conservative attitudes among young African American males toward sex and family issues. Increasingly alternative explanations have emerged (e.g., Sullivan, 1985) that indicate that inner-city African American youth tend to acknowledge their paternity readily, though not formally, and that the African American community facilitates the informal establishment of paternity and the young father's involvement in informal child support arrangements. The economic constraints associated with African American fathers' engagement with their children are not unique to them. Seltzer (1994) reports that all fathers, particularly those separated from their children by divorce, are less involved when they are unable to contribute to the child's economic well-being. The intergenerational nature of problems around education and employment for African American men and fathers can not be resolved through short-term responses that ignore issues of discrimination and public perception.

### **Issues from Practice, Implications for Research**

Over the past 20 years, and particularly within the past ten years, the focus on fathers has increased in family support programs. Although the number of programs for mothers (adolescent and young adult mothers in particular) is inadequate, and the quality of support to the mothers and their children is sometimes questionable if not obviously poor, the need for support to this population has become a part of policy and research discussions. In current forums on families and programs to support them, children are the central focus; opposition to efforts on fathers by mother support initiatives is being replaced slowly by talk about how to provide both mothers and fathers with assistance and how to bring mothers and fathers together for the welfare of the child. Where programs focused on fathers exclusively, many have expanded their missions to look at the apparent impediments to father involvement, e.g., unemployment and education, and the

personal and developmental domains of adolescent and young adult male life. The needs with which African American fathers, particularly young fathers, enter such programs and the issues that belie their experiences may be differentiated from those of other men as a function of age, race or culture, education, economic condition, or familial structure.

A small niche of effort on fathers, developed around and in support of practice, attempts to attend to these issues by connecting the common interests of programs with stated commitment to supporting families. Such programs assist young fathers in handling the complexities of daily life and assuming the responsibility of parenting; they work to make local, state, and national policies more responsive to the needs of young fathers, mothers, and their children. As is true of any movement or effort, however, the missions and purposes of the groups involved differ, sometimes vastly. For example, several groups and programs focused on fathers in general attribute young men's problems to rapid changes in family formation patterns, with some equating these changing family forms to the erosion of family values and increased participation of women in the labor market. Many do not acknowledge family forms outside of marriage and center their efforts on "preserving family values." The emphasis here is on increasing the number of intact families (in which father and mother are married to each other with children living in the same household) and not necessarily on improving the structures that reduce opportunities for individuals to create and preserve their own families, beliefs, and values. Issues of unemployment, poverty, and discrimination lie outside the boundaries of these discussions as do arguments about the effects of parents' emotional absence in strained relationships or physical absence due to economic stress.

A variety of other programs exist, many of which struggle with the issues of social welfare among low-income African American fathers, other low-income fathers or fathers of color, and their families. While some of these programs promote co-parenting strategies between young fathers and mothers, others attempt only to assist young men as a first intervention strategy to working with the entire family. Some programs address the educational and psychosocial development of the fathers and their children; others attend to these issues and the more comprehensive concerns of systemic change.

African American fathers, like their fathers and mothers before them, have a distinctive cultural and political history in the United States which has resulted in persistent exposure to discrimination, poor schools, and few economic opportunity structures. The treatment of African American males over time has minimized if not ignored their contributions to their families, portraying African American fathers, whether in the media or the public press, as absent, unwilling to work, and financially and socially irresponsible. Not only do non-African Americans see these portrayals, so do African American children, many of whom will become fathers. Programs are faced with combating these popular impressions for policy and debunking them for the young fathers who enter their programs.

As fathers of all ages become the focus of discussions in policy and target of initiatives and laws around child support and paternity, the number of programs that assist young men to assume the responsibilities of parenting has increased. These programs may be family-based projects, located in research centers, developed between communities and municipal governments, created as child welfare initiatives, or respond to federal and state efforts in family support. Our meetings and interviews with a small, representative sample

of these programs, participants in the National Practitioners Network, suggest that these programs have several purposes, from unencumbered goals of connecting children and fathers to agendas for which the marriage of the participants to the mothers of their child(ren) is the stated purpose.

Programs are developed out of personal, foundation, community, and state and local initiatives. Estimates of the number of programs are difficult, however. Programs may receive all or no public funding, may be supported by private foundations sometimes with partial contributions from state and local governments, or may be established by community or religious groups receiving little public attention. Whether they stand as father-focused efforts or are integrated into larger efforts, these programs describe themselves as committed to the survival of children. The degree to which their program activities address their focus on children may vary.

The work of programs may include developing frameworks and activities to ensuring the welfare of children through system approaches. Programs may focus on policy assessment and analysis and direct line initiatives, revolve around male development and self-sufficiency, or center on family mediation. Despite the complement of effort, until recently little discussion occurred across these programs. The National Practitioners Network, established in July 1994 (in concert with the National Center on Fathers and Families and currently located in the Families and Work Institute) is one of a few national efforts to connect these programs into a collective that supports fathers in general and addresses the specific issues confronting African American fathers and other fathers of color in low-income homes. The issues that these programs have begun to disentangle demonstrate the incongruencies between public perceptions and the lived experiences of young African American fathers. They point to the complexities of supporting fathers and responding to familial, personal, social, and systemic problems facing young fathers. How these issues are experienced and negotiated by young fathers is central to the emerging discussions in practice and for practitioners.

### **Connecting Practice and Research: Issues from One Effort**

**T**he Responsive Fathers Program (RFP) is one of four components of the Father Re-Engagement Initiative at the Philadelphia Children's Network (PCN). The goal of the Initiative, which includes RFP, a co-parenting project, policy analysis, and a media campaign, is to improve the life chances of young children and families. Since its inception in 1990, RFP has had increasingly close contact with approximately 50 young men who have fathered almost 100 children with approximately 75 young women. One of the original sites of the Young Unwed Fathers Pilot Project organized by Public/Private Ventures, RFP was designed to determine whether a combination of education, counseling, employment training, and fatherhood development activities would encourage and enable young fathers to be engaged with their children. The original question to which the program aimed to respond was what would it take to get fathers to pay child support. However, based on the findings from the program, the questions developed into a broader concern: what would it take (e.g., in terms of time, support, and strategies) to create sustainable connections between young fathers and the increasing numbers of children?



The program knits together multiple elements of a developing comprehensive strategy, including case management, a parenting skills curriculum, peer support, job development and on-the-job support, a modest educational fund, and an emergency loan program. After two years of working exclusively with the fathers, the program expanded its work to a comprehensive family-child-community support effort. It created a

co-parenting education program which brings young fathers and mothers together around the welfare of the child, a peer educational and community service program, an entrepreneurial development initiative, and an in-house training component. After examining the nature and scope of the young fathers' needs, the program decided that "rather than make time the constant and goal achievement the variable [as many programs are forced to do], PCN [would] hold fast to the goals and accept the challenge to invest the time and develop the additional strategies to achieve them" (*PCN Annual Report*, 1993).

From 1991 to present, 80% of the fathers have been in close contact with their children, with 75% providing regular financial support either formally or informally; 60% have or are ready to earn high school diplomas, the Graduate Equivalency Diploma, or continuing education and training; 91% have been employed part-time or full-time; and at any given time, approximately 60% of available fathers (not incarcerated or in college full-time) are employed or in training programs.

While the results of any program, particularly in its early stages, should be taken modestly, RFP is an example of how young fathers and the practitioners who work with them come to interpret their needs and reciprocal contributions, what the societal and interpersonal disincentives to emotional fatherhood are, and what the social and developmental demands are for young African-American men to make the transition to parenthood.

To attend a meeting with RFP participants or meet them informally is to understand how similar, yet so divergent, their needs and life experiences are to other young men—confined often by negative images of African American fathers intergenerationally, unlaudatory portraits and strained perceptions about African American mothers, and limited expectations and resources for African American children. One also is struck by the persistent, though not always successful, effort of the young men to prepare themselves for responsive fatherhood. The cultural and familial contexts create boundaries and conditions that may serve as points of entry or closure.

Perhaps the most obvious strength that the young fathers bring to the program is their concern and caring for their children. For example, Jerry, a 22 year-old with two children has maintained a close relationship with his daughter, although he is not married to her mother. The father also of a two year-old son, to whose mother he is married, Jerry interacts with his son, diapers and feeds him. Jerry has also assumed the responsibility for a step-child, requesting of the biological father that he demonstrate a level of contact and consistency in the child's life. This caring, like that of many of the young men in the program, is attenuated often by a lack of fathering role models, inadequate employment to fulfill the traditional "provider" role, and sometimes complex relationships with the mothers of their children. The issues facing Jerry, however, constitute only a fraction of the problems that confront the program.

Based on our interviews with the staff and our review of research and RFP program materials and records, we have identified five critical issues that should be addressed by programs and research:

*Issue 1: Despite the implications of early role transitions for young fathers, relatively little research has examined whether and how young fathers' behaviors change as a result of fatherhood or what the long-term effects of young fatherhood are on father involvement and young men's feelings of self-worth and competence.*

Role transition is the process of changing from one set of expected behaviors in a social system to another—that is, of trying on or enacting a variety of social roles (Allen and Van de Vliert, 1984). The experiences of RFP staff with young fathers, all of whom are from low-income homes and are African American, coupled with suggestions from the literature, indicate that this transition is often incomplete for disproportionate numbers of young fathers; the apparent inconsistencies in their support and inattention to personal and family issues often reflect their inability to make the abrupt transition to adult roles and the maturity required to be responsive parents. Programs can work effectively with research efforts to understand better the impact of young fatherhood on young men's behaviors and attitudes, e.g., the need to complete high school, improve literacy, and obtain employment. A central question might focus on how the presence of a baby and a family changes or affects the self-perception and behaviors of young fathers.

*Issue 2: The experiences of young fathers and mothers within their families of origin contribute to their attitudes and beliefs about the role of parents and the nature of relationships between mothers and fathers. These attitudes determine whether young fathers and mothers will participate in efforts to co-parent and develop relationships that promote the development of their children.*

Co-parenting activities are designed to help young fathers and mothers develop relationships, within or outside of marriage, that ensure the access and support of both parents to the child. Although co-parenting programs typically include the mother and father, programs recognize that how the mother and father interpret the expectations, experiences, and usefulness of the activities may be determined, in large part, by the beliefs, practices, and cultures of their families of origin. From RFP records and interviews, we are reminded that families wield a great deal of influence on young parents and often do not have the resources or desire to assist the young men in changing behaviors. Thus, programs must not only work with young fathers in supporting their children and engaging in co-parenting activities with the mothers of their children but also create approaches to working with the families of origin as positive forces in the welfare of children. In constructing the issues, research and practice might pose the questions: (1) what is the quantity and quality of social support available to young fathers and mothers from their families of origin, (2) how do family practices influence the parenting behaviors of young fathers and affect their participation in co-parenting efforts, and (3) what are the intergenerational implications.

*Issue 3: Employment is central to young men's view of themselves as providers. To provide for the financial needs of their children and families, young fathers with few possibilities for gainful employment may turn to illegal economies.*

Work and the income associated with it are valued in most communities. Young fathers, irrespective of age, background, or work history value work. Goodwin (1972), for example, found that all groups in American society seemingly value work for similar reasons, including self-worth, survival, and support of children and families. Based on interview and observational data from RFP, we have reason to believe that many young fathers served by father-focused programs engage at some time in illegal work; based on our own intuitive sense and research such as Goodwin's (1972) study, we suggest that their involvement may be related, in part, to their need to support families and establish credibility within their households and with their children. This seems particularly applicable to young fathers who engage in no other illegal activity and begs the questions: (1) what is the relationship between unemployment and involvement in illegal economies, and (2) what types of policies are necessary to respond to unemployment among young fathers.

*Issue 4: Many young fathers lack the literacy skills to engage in sustainable work or meaningful, nurturing home activities. Although many have completed high school or several years of schooling, they are poorly prepared to participate in the problem-solving tasks required for high-level positions or basic literacy requirements for lower level positions and family life in general.*

A variety of reports (e.g., *A Nation at Risk*, 1983; *National Adult Literacy Survey*, 1993) describe a range of literacy problems among young Americans. The 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) found surprisingly low levels of literacy across all groups with the most serious implications for people living in poverty and for African American and Latino youth. The relationships between literacy and employment and between literacy and children's performance in schools have been chronicled in many studies (e.g., Bishop, 1992; Ferguson, 1993; O'Neill, 1990; Sum, Fogg, Fogg and Williams, 1991). We believe that literacy is the silent issue that discourages many young men from seeking employment or engaging their children with books and other print. Unlike the politicized commentaries about the importance of literacy to "breaking the cycle of poverty," we position the issues within a developmental approach in which young fathers and their families are assisted on an as-needed basis to help them achieve personal and economic self-sufficiency. The basic questions for programs are: (1) how does literacy affect fathers' attachment to their children and families, their willingness to be involved with their children, and their ability to seek and sustain employment, and (2) what cross-disciplinary, cross-domain efforts are needed to identify and respond to the literacy needs of young African American fathers and their families.

*Issue 5: Existing policies at state and local levels minimize rather than increase possibilities for co-parenting and father involvement. These systemic barriers convolute the already difficult problems facing young African American fathers in*

*supporting their families.*

Information from programs such as RFP and from research and field studies suggests that key aspects of the existing family support system operate to discourage fathers from remaining actively involved with their children (P/PV, 1994; Mincy, 1994; Seltzer, 1994). Hospitals do not take advantage systematically of the propitious moment of a child's birth to encourage fathers to declare paternity. When unwed fathers decide they want to declare paternity, the very act can arouse in mothers the fear of custody battles and destroy often tenuous relationships. When mothers take fathers to court to collect child support, legal

paternity takes on strictly economic connotations that weaken the potential for sustained father involvement. The systemic issues are multifaceted, beginning and ending with the question: what are the specific policy changes (e.g., paternity and child support) necessary to ensure father engagement and support young parents' commitment to the welfare of their children?

### **Summary and Conclusion**

There is no shortage of research to suggest that African American children are over-represented in female-headed households. We believe that the role of the African American father, as is true for all fathers, is not limited to their economic support; that is, African American fathers play important roles in the psychosocial and cognitive development of their children. While research often attributes the problems faced by African American fathers to specific factors such as poor schooling, poverty, discrimination, and access, findings from programs, the experiences of practitioners, and the small body of research suggest that a plethora of personal and systemic circumstances contribute to whether and how young men choose to participate in their children's lives.

The focus of much of this paper has been on young African American fathers, both married and unmarried. We suggest that fatherhood for young African American men, not unlike young men across other cultural and socioeconomic groups, becomes "the proxy" for adulthood, forcing young men to display a level of confidence about adult responsibilities for which they are unprepared. Sometimes still in their adolescence, many of these young fathers lack access to educational and social resources that enable children to make the transition to parenthood.

Two pervasive themes run through the discussion here. The first builds on the transitional issues and impact of social development. Social development is that double-sided process in which children become integrated into the larger social community and differentiated as distinctive individuals. It is a life-span process which requires the active participation of both adults and children and in which adults select contexts with which children have experiences and from which they must abstract social categories and rules of behavior.

Children are not the mere recipients of parent functions; they need to be able to develop the cognitive and social abilities to understand rules, roles, social categories, and expectations—abilities that children must acquire to accept their current roles and their future roles as adults. They must acquire knowledge of when to act like a nursery school student, when to behave like a friend, when to act like an African American, when to negotiate the role of child and parent, and when to assume the responsibilities associated with adulthood or parenthood. Once children understand when to do these things, they must understand how to seek resources, how to access them, and ultimately how to translate them into support for themselves and the children and families for whom they will be responsible someday.

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a special domain of this life-span development. It assumes that certain social and psychological development has occurred. For African American males and fathers, the developmental and transitional issues are exacerbated by public perception and limited opportunity and reward structures. For many of the African American men in RFP and other programs, the early socialization and personality



formation have been reduced by limited access to parental, economic, social, and educational resources—the absence of fathers, male role models, or family and community support for their development. Their transition is typically from adolescence to fatherhood, void of the temporal space to deconstruct adolescent myths, play out adolescent fantasies or realities, develop intellectual competencies, or construct notions of parenting and responsibility for self and others. For young parents—fathers and mothers alike—parenthood becomes the proxy for adulthood. Yet, our work with young fathers and the programs that assist them suggest that this proxy is being undermined by the enormous need of the young men to be supported in the transition to both adulthood and fatherhood.

A second theme is from field-based assessments in programs such as RFP to research studies that suggest the apparent disparities between the societal meanings attached to father involvement and cultural attributions must be considered. The role of families of origin in determining and dictating how young fathers and mothers interact around children, the unwritten but encoded messages of father responsibility, lack of knowledge and misunderstandings about parenting and relationships, the inability to manipulate social systems, and the problems associated with supporting children and achieving male, provider status within the families are but a few of the issues that the young men in the program identify.

What are conspicuously absent from current discussions are research efforts and research agendas that explore the range of issues that contribute to the problems facing African American males and fathers. Research on the role that schools can play and on how the classroom experiences of African American males affect their capacity to obtain employment and assume the responsibilities of parenting should be coupled with specific ways that school personnel can assist young boys in developing the necessary social and academic skills for adulthood. Research on families might focus less on seeking out the negative impact of female-headed households and labor more intensively to understand what set of circumstances and conditions within these households and others contribute to the development of strong families and positive environments for raising children.

Policy might conduct analyses about whether and the degree to which existing political issues and limited understanding of the cultural contexts in which African American male development and fatherhood occur contrive opportunities to improve the problem. The problems facing young African American fathers are the problems of schools, families, and communities; they require critical discourse and action from research, policy, and practice. Collectively, these three areas must accept the larger challenge of creating and sustaining reciprocal relationships which allow them to see the conditions of African American males, fathers, mothers, and families as not simply obstacles but points of entry to fulfilling the promises of social policies and possibilities for social justice.

#### Notes

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# Revisionist and Post-Revisionist Paradigms in Life Transitions of Black Males: A Commentary from Research

*Deborah J. Johnson, Ph.D.*

The critical feature shared among the three papers in this monograph is their illustration of the depth and multidimensional development of the African American male. As a group, the papers reflect the paradigmatic shift that is taking place in the literature involving Black males and sometimes even consuming Black males (i.e., Hunter & Davis, 1992). Previously, the literature was replete with the “bad” news of the Black male’s aberrant personality, lack of role fulfillment, and disenfranchisement from family and work (i.e., Gibbs, 1994; Polite, 1994). Historically, the research arena has been particularly narrow, highlighting endless failure in the lives of African American men and boys. However, more insidious than the negative way in which these paradigms emerged and took hold was the simplicity with which previous researchers attempted to describe their subjects (e.g., Frazier, 1939; Moynihan, 1965).

Revisionist work seeks to amend, extend, or reconstruct prevailing thinking utilizing new evidence or analyses. The revision of traditional interpretations of Black life have given way to broader arenas for the focused study of Black male life, wherein the papers in this monograph are important examples. These papers are revisionist in that they challenge the simple and negative ways in which Black males have been viewed, offering to us a more complex and enriched view of their development and interactions within the African American community. In the Gadsden and Smith paper, for instance, father absence is contextualized in ways not typically explored. The barriers to father involvement are investigated, and a model of successful and balanced parenting among teen and young adult fathers and mothers is put forward. As a challenge to previous thinking in the area of father absence, the authors reconsider the conventional wisdom that household residence and consistent father participation and involvement in parenting are directly related. Gadsden and Smith, as well as Bowman, present evidence noting the importance of parental involvement among nonresidential fathers. However, Bowman adds a new insight to the argument by linking academic success, or at least matriculation, to the ability to fulfill effective parenting roles. Both papers also argue against the prevailing view that Black males are not motivated to participate in the job market.

Consistent with revisionist research, the papers in this monograph demonstrate new ways of thinking about persistent problems facing Black males that get beyond the failure paradigm. Like Bowman, Davis and Jordan also challenge conventional thinking about Black male achievement in schools. Davis and Jordan move from the school failure paradigm frequently used to explain the school achievement of Black children to an exploration of the variation in the achievement patterns of African American children, focusing on Black males. They also advocate a more ecological, bi-directional approach to investigations of achievement among Black males.

Bowman challenges the view of the American educational system as a monolithic force that either liberates the Black male or relegates him to unemployment. The American educational system is presented as a multifaceted system that can be analyzed in terms of individual deficit, systemic deficit, centralized national goal-setting, and cultural diversity approaches. These various approaches have more or less potential to produce an employable male prepared to participate in the nation's economy and to contribute to society. Bowman argues that the systemic deficit approach has the greatest potential to provide an educational environment that promotes the success of black males. Furthermore, Davis and Jordan's critique of previous research methods in this arena and the call for theory-building lays the groundwork for further revision of the failure paradigm.

These papers also incorporate some post-revisionist thinking. In my view, post-revisionist thought requires agenda-setting in research, a focus that goes beyond explaining and redressing past challenges. In post-revisionist work, primary consideration is given to questions which arise from the circumstances and specific needs of those under investigation. The notion of father presence is one such example. The changing focus of research and practice from father absence to father presence has positive consequences for the development of research questions and interventions. The father presence paradigm models success and has greater utility for community-building interventions. New questions arise in this paradigm, such as: what do fathers substantively offer to the positive outcomes of their children? That is, do fathers merely represent a paycheck, reflecting enriched resources and opportunities for their children? Do they have the added value of being another parenting adult, of equal value to a grandmother, aunt, adult sister, uncle, or grandfather? Or can we establish that fathers offer unique socialization experiences and therefore can play a very meaningful role in the successful outcomes of their children?

The power of post-revisionist thinking is illustrated quite nicely in the case study that Gadsden and Smith describe. The Responsive Fathers Program (RFP) challenged itself by changing its mission from the question around which it was initially designed, "What would it take to get fathers to pay child support?", to the less condemning and more comprehensive question of "What would it take to create sustainable connections between young fathers and the increasing numbers of children?" RFP soon discovered that meeting this new challenge required changes in intervention strategy as well.

Post-revisionist work in the area of Black fatherhood has not been challenged to the extent as has the study of Black males in other areas (i.e., personality, delinquency, work, and marital relationships). This is true primarily because the study of fathering among Black males is burgeoning along with the study of fathering more generally and has resulted in the existence of fewer barriers to this work in comparison to other arenas in which Black men are studied.

Along these same lines, the Davis and Jordan paper has much to offer as well. In the area of development, achievement, and schooling Black males have been assumed to have a particular trajectory—downward, to be specific (Hare and Castenell, 1985). The Davis and Jordan paper challenges this assumption by assessing both the context and time of development. They have shown us that the context for the Black male's development often changes, and thus his experiences change. How the Black male adolescent is perceived at

puberty differs from how he was viewed as a young child. His developmental changes influence not only how others view the child but also how the child views himself. Acknowledging the presence of bi-directional effects represents a major shift in how we study achievement among Black males.

Although not the focus of their paper, Davis and Jordan introduce the issue of gender identity into the discussion of Black male achievement. The new discussion revolves around the discourse of masculinity and barriers to achievement. It is a critical discussion and one that has appeared but has not been explicitly addressed in the works of others. I suspect that more empirical work on this question will emerge in the future.

Finally, a critical point easily overlooked in the marvelous and subtle text of Gadsden and Smith is the reminder that the study of fatherhood among Black males is truly the study of the challenges facing men and women raising children in Black communities. The investigations of parenting among Black males tacitly involves parenting issues facing Black women and the development of African American children. More implicit in the Bowman paper is the linkage between educational attainment and the productive two-parent family, as well as healthy familial relations. Emerging works like those discussed serve the more than welcomed paradigmatic shift regarding Black males and the infiltration of new knowledge and thinking in research and practice.

# African American Manhood and Fatherhood: A Commentary from Practice

*Edward W. Pitt*

The papers in this monograph are especially timely given the tremendously high visibility the topic is currently experiencing. The “fatherhood” theme in particular has captured the attention of politicians, academics, and social and cultural activists of every persuasion. The importance of this issue was highlighted, for example, when the National Academy of Sciences sponsored a meeting (Fall 1993) entitled, *America’s Fathers and Public Policy*, to discuss pressing needs of the nation’s children, the diversity of fathers, and the proliferation of research on fathers.

What is particularly noteworthy about these papers is that they reflect a consensus emerging in the African American community that the “fatherhood issue” is *real* and requires urgent and widespread attention. Numerous organizations and agencies are implementing a rich mix of activities, programs and services targeted at African American males, fathers and families (e.g., the National Council of African American Males). If these efforts are going to achieve maximum impact and effectiveness they will need to be grounded in an accurate and substantive knowledge-base supplied by researchers who are dedicated to strengthening African American families and supporting responsible fatherhood among African American males.

In their paper on *African American Males and Fatherhood: Issues in Research and Practice*, Gadsden and Smith remind us that despite more than ten years of public discourse about these issues, research on African American boys and men pales in comparison to the negative public perception of them as predatory purveyors of crime and violence; a view perpetuated by policy discussions suggesting that African American males are inherently irresponsible, erratic, *and* (as fathers) unable to assume the responsibilities of employment and parenthood.

Ten years ago, opportunities for research and practice around fatherhood were rather limited. As one of few efforts, in November of 1986, for example, while working at the National Urban League (NUL), I assembled a panel of distinguished African American researchers in an attempt to obtain an African American perspective on the issue of Manhood and Fatherhood (e.g., Robert Hill, James McGee, Lawrence Gary, Leo Hendricks, Jawanza Kunjufu, and Wade Nobles). This dialogue among African American researchers provided the knowledge-base and perspective for two subsequent NUL-sponsored, national conferences on the theme of *Manhood and Fatherhood in the African American Community*; a guide to developing programs; a sixty-agency network of community based Urban League programs targeted to adolescent males and young fathers; and, an award-winning national multi-media teen pregnancy-prevention and responsible fatherhood campaign. Despite its modest beginnings, the public discourse in the field has expanded significantly.

Since those early NUL meetings, I have maintained the position that above all other issues facing African Americans, African American scholars must be a part of the public discourse on fatherhood. Furthermore, African American scholars and community service providers must establish an open working relationship that permits each camp to inform and be informed by the other. These focused discussions between practitioners and researchers will strengthen the quality of research and the efficacy of program services and intervention strategies.

In addition to the ten-year reminder provided by Gadsden and Smith, the papers in this monograph contribute a number of important points separately. When combined, however, they provide a solid theoretical and empirical basis for in-depth, traditional and field-based research on African American males and the promotion of employment and career-centered training programs in schools and community settings. The papers by Davis and Jordan and Bowman and Gadsden stress the importance of education as (1) one of the few vehicles of economic mobility among poor, black, and disenfranchised people and (2) an instrumental aspect of responsible fatherhood among African American males when linked to employment. Like men from other cultural and ethnic groups, as Gadsden and Smith remind us, African American men internalize popular notions of men “owning” (in a sense) the “provider role,” a view which is reinforced by societal and familial expectations of men. Young African American fathers, irrespective of age and background or work history value work for both its intrinsic worth and as a means of providing for their families.

Finally, and from my perspective, most importantly, the papers underscore the significance of practitioners whether in schools or local programs. The papers remind those of us who work with young black men, children, mothers, and families in formal and informal community settings that it is the individual workers and teachers and their commitment to and concern for the future of African American men and their families that will determine the success of program efforts. *Sometimes the messenger is more important than the message.* Supportive policies and appropriate resources in the hands of dedicated practitioners—be they teachers, mentors, counselors, or spiritual leaders—will produce fantastic results.



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